

Domestic and Family Violence

Notes on the Effects of Domestic/Family Violence on Children

Children's exposure to domestic/family violence

Children do not need to see domestic violence to be exposed to it. Exposure to domestic violence can take on many forms. Some ways which children are exposed to domestic violence may include:

- ◆ hearing a violent or abusive event
- ◆ living with tension and fear in the home
- ◆ directly seeing their mother abused
- ◆ witnessing mothers injuries or distress
- ◆ being hurt by the violence either directly, or indirectly E.G; when trying to intervene or when used as a shield against abusive actions
- ◆ experiencing the aftermath of a violent event
- ◆ experiencing threats to their mother, siblings or pets

Risk factors

Children who witness domestic violence are at an increased risk of:

- ◆ exposure to traumatic events
- ◆ neglect
- ◆ being directly abused (accidentally or deliberately)
- ◆ child sexual and physical abuse
- ◆ behavioural problems
- ◆ of losing one or both parents or a parent figure
- ◆ impact on development particularly in areas of social, emotional and cognitive development
- ◆ experiencing constant re-location/ living in refuge or inadequate accommodation
- ◆ severe trauma through mother's emotional unavailability
- ◆ deliberate isolation or alienation from mother and or siblings by perpetrator
- ◆ entering child protection system and
- ◆ juvenile court systems

Effects are many and vary for different stages and ages of development and may include:

Infants

- ◆ Cries often, difficult to settle
- ◆ sleeps for only short periods of time
- ◆ exaggerated or prolonged startle response
- ◆ lack of attachment developing with primary caregivers
- ◆ not meeting developmental milestones as expected
- ◆ failure to thrive

Young-middle age children

- ◆ sleeplessness, fears of going to sleep, nightmares, dreams, restless/ anxious behaviour at rest times
- ◆ bed wetting or regression to earlier developmental stages
EG; “clingy and whiny”
- ◆ headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick or tired
- ◆ hyper-vigilance to danger or being hurt – no where is safe
- ◆ excessive worry / stress related disorders (anxiety)
- ◆ fighting with others, hurting other children or animals
- ◆ aggressive outbursts or defiant behaviour
- ◆ be over compliant or take on responsibility beyond their age
- ◆ withdrawing from people or activities
- ◆ listlessness, sad, depressed, low energy
- ◆ difficulties concentrating, paying attention or completing an activity or task
- ◆ difficulty relating to peers
- ◆ poor school performance
- ◆ more absences from school
- ◆ fears from being separated from the non offending parent
- ◆ feeling that his/her best is not good enough
- ◆ taking on adult or parental responsibilities
- ◆ dissociation
- ◆ repetitive play about violent event
- ◆ identifying with or mirroring behaviours of the abuser
- ◆ feelings of loneliness and isolation
- ◆ not showing feelings about anything (emotional numbing)
- ◆ drug and alcohol abuse
- ◆ running away
- ◆ suicide attempts or engaging in dangerous behaviour

Adolescents

- ◆ suicide attempts
- ◆ self-harming behaviours
- ◆ drug and or alcohol use
- ◆ involvement in juvenile crime
- ◆ running away/ homelessness
- ◆ brain development and the effects of domestic violence

Factors that influence how children adjust following domestic/family violence include:

- ◆ the nature of the violence e.g. the intensity, proximity and duration
- ◆ the child's characteristics e.g. age, gender, temperament, developmental stage)
- ◆ Consistent and predictable environments and relationships
- ◆ availability of responsive caregiver or significant other

What you can do?

- ◆ be curious, look behind the behaviour, there is always a reason for a behaviour
- ◆ develop a supportive and nurturing relationship with the child
- ◆ provide support/referral to parents
- ◆ encourage child contact with significant others who provide positive relationships / experiences for the child e.g. grand parents, aunt, or childcare workers
- ◆ advocate for the child and ensure they stay visible when supporting parents
- ◆ Listen to what children say and what they do

**With acknowledgement to the Benevolent Society
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Further readings:

Young Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence: Toward a Developmental Risk and Resilience Framework for Research and Intervention.

- ◆ Paper #6 Early Childhood, Domestic Violence and Poverty: Helping Young Children and Their Families. Gewirtz, A, Ph.D & Edleson, J. L, Ph.D. 2004
- ◆ Safety Planning – Children and Young People who live with Domestic Violence. Waugh, F & Bonner, M. (2003)